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Lesley Andrew

Edith Cowan University, Australia, l.andrew@ecu.edu.au

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Ensuring Equitable Work-Integrated Learning Opportunities for International Students

Abstract

Ensuring equitable work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for international students can be problematic. This position paper explores this challenge within the context of the Master of Public Health course (MPH) in Australian universities. The availability and accessibility of placement and non-placement WIL for international students are examined through a desktop audit of MPH offerings across 27 public Australian universities. These findings, interpreted through the lens of cultural, social and financial capital suggest although international students stand to benefit more from WIL than their domestic peers, their opportunity to participate is lower. The paper argues a strength-based approach is needed to mitigate this issue of inequity. Suggestions are offered to improve equity in placement and non-placement WIL for international students.

Keywords

Non-placement work-integrated learning, equity, international student, public health, placement work-integrated learning, inclusive approaches to WIL

Introduction

Placement work-integrated learning (WIL) is strongly associated with graduate employability (Ferns 2014). The opportunity to engage in placement WIL is therefore seen as an advantageous and highly desirable feature of the degree curriculum. This paper examines the current inequity in the provision of WIL opportunities for international students across Australian Master of Public Health postgraduate curricula. It discusses how the accessibility and availability of WIL may be enhanced to meet the diverse needs of international students in Australian Higher Education.

International students and WIL

Australia's popularity among international students is undeniable, attracting 10% of all students who study abroad, one of the largest shares among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. Although a heterogeneous group, most of these students come from developing nations, predominantly China (37.3%) and India (20.5%) (OECD 2019). The financial importance of these students to Australian society is immense. The total revenue attributed to the group in 2017 was \$32,028,091, a 6.2% increase from 2016 (Ferguson & Sherrell 2019). While less immediately tangible, international students also benefit Australian society through their enrichment of cultural diversity, cultural literacy, cultural capital and enhanced linkages with other nations (Deloitte Access Economics 2016; Hobsons Asia Pacific 2015).

The expectation of a better job in the student's chosen field of study, and the securing of temporary or permanent residency are primary drivers for Australia-bound international students (Hobsons Asia Pacific 2015); these expectations rely on employment within Australia following graduation. While a degree qualification cannot guarantee employment in today's highly competitive graduate market, a period of WIL within the degree curriculum can greatly enhance student desirability (Gribble, Blackmore & Rahimi 2015; Jackson 2017). Although definitions vary, the description of WIL used in this paper comes from Patrick et al. (2008), who refer to it as:

“an umbrella term used for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum, and through specifically designed co-curricular programs where students' graduate capabilities are enhanced by co-curricular work experience and community engagement opportunities” (p. v).

This term allows for the consideration of all forms of WIL available to international students across MPH courses, both on-campus and off-campus in practice placement.

While many types of WIL exist, the *gold standard* approach is the off-campus placement, such as an internship or cadetship. Offering a high level of community engagement, placements support authentic skill development and expose students to networking opportunities that may prove advantageous post-graduation (Ferns 2014). Although international students are increasingly expecting to be offered WIL as part of their degree, they experience lower rates of participation in placement WIL than their domestic peers (Gribble, Blackmore & Rahimi 2015). This situation is reported to create disappointment, disillusion and frustration among international students (Blackmore et al. 2014). This paper argues it is also inequitable.

Desktop WIL audit exercise and findings

A desktop audit of the websites of 27 public universities offering the Master of Public Health was undertaken in April 2020. This and other health science courses are particularly popular with international students in Australia (Norton, Cherastidtham & Mackey 2018). The audit explored the availability and accessibility of WIL and revealed disparate opportunities across university offerings.

Ten of the 27 universities made no mention of a placement or non-placement WIL unit within their MPH course structure. Two additional universities also had no placement or non-placement WIL unit, but stated they embedded employability skills across the curriculum. Five universities offered non-placement WIL units, all of which focussed on professional practice/employability skills. Two of these five units included a short off-campus volunteer experience. Two universities offered an inter-semester two-week overseas WIL experience at \$2000 to \$3000 dollars per student.

Just 12 of the 27 universities provided a dedicated placement WIL unit within the MPH curriculum. Of these 12, eight described admission to these placements as limited or competitive, with students selected according to their prior academic achievement (grade score average) or other (unspecified) merit criteria. The time allocated to placements varied from two to five days a week throughout the semester.

It is evident from these findings that placement WIL is not universally available in MPH courses. While some universities may offer employability focussed activities within the curriculum that are not easily identified by desk-top audit, a lack of provision of dedicated non-placement WIL units is also evident. The following discussion argues this lack of availability, and the choice of admissions criteria and time expectations of WIL placements disproportionately disadvantage international students. It also argues that non-placement WIL initiatives must offer international students an authentic and effective way to develop their employability.

Interpretation of findings

The importance of capital resources to student opportunity in WIL

Bourdieu's ideas of *cultural*, *social* and *economic capital* (1986) are often drawn on to conceptualise the disadvantages experienced by minority students at university, including those from a low socioeconomic status background (LSES) and first-generation students (Devlin 2013; Thomas & Quinn 2007). These ideas can also offer an interpretation of the disadvantages facing international students in terms of WIL.

Within the sphere of higher education (HE) cultural capital is viewed as the language, values, experiences and ways of knowing expected of a student by a university (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu theorised that students who possess this capital have greater power and opportunity than those without this resource, or who possess a form incongruent with the expectations of the university they attend.

For domestic students in Australian HE, schooling, and in the case of postgraduates, previous undergraduate university experience, offer an opportunity to develop these *ways of knowing* Australian academia. These opportunities are unavailable to international students, who begin university in Australia with a different foundation knowledge of academia, its systems, culture and

expectations. This cultural capital *dissonance* coupled with a tendency to have lower English Language proficiency means these students are less likely to achieve the scores and accolades that appear as prerequisites to placement WIL identified in the desktop audit, disproportionately and unfairly disenfranchising them when they compete for these opportunities.

International students who do manage to secure a WIL placement may be further challenged by the expectations of the work environment's reliance on nuanced and advanced written and verbal communication skills. Together with local colloquialisms, accents and implicit cultural behaviours, the placement may represent an impenetrable working and learning environment (Patrick et al. 2008).

Two further forms of capital influence the student experience and overall success at university. The first, social capital, is described by Bourdieu (1986, pp. 248-249) as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". Social capital offers reciprocal networks and shared knowledge that benefit its members and is highly correlated with student achievement at university and beyond (Bourdieu 1986; Tierney 2000). International students are much less likely than their domestic peers to have experience of working in the Australian workplace, especially in the industry associated with their degree discipline, meaning they have less social capital to draw on. Placement WIL is therefore particularly valuable to help international students build beneficial social networks and insider knowledge associated with future employment opportunities.

The accessibility of placement WIL experiences may also be restricted by international students' economic capital, defined by Bourdieu (1986, p. 47) as "a resource that could be immediately and directly converted into money". Although finances of most students may be limited, international students may face exceptional difficulties. The difference in tuition fees between domestic and international students in Australia is one of the highest in the OECD (OECD 2019). With international student fees roughly double domestic fees, and with the added cost of relocation, accommodation and for some, family responsibilities, the financial stress of international students can be huge. As around 50% of international students in Australia come from a low-income background, their families are not necessarily able to provide ongoing financial support. In these situations, employment during study is essential (Hobsons Asia Pacific 2015). The time expectations of some of the WIL activities revealed in the desktop audit reduce the already limited time available to these students to engage in paid work. The cost of the inter-semester two-week overseas field trips offered by two of the universities represent an exceptionally unrealistic opportunity for students on a financial budget. Perhaps more manageable is a flexible version of the volunteer WIL options described in some of the professional skills on-campus units. It is evident that the inconsistent availability of WIL and the disparity of its accessibility among international students is an issue of inequity that requires redressing.

Higher Education as a vehicle of social justice

According to Bourdieu (1986) education systems that do not address the inequality faced by minority or disadvantaged students reinforce societal inequity, with the financial and social benefits education brings restricted to those already in positions of privilege. While the widening participation agenda in Australia and beyond has gone some way to rectify inequality of participation in HE, the seemingly elitist approach to WIL demonstrated in the desktop audit more closely reflects Bourdieu's description of a system that recreates social inequity.

According to the International Association of Universities (IAU): ‘the goal of access policies should be successful participation in higher education, as access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase’ (IAU 2008, p. 1). Offering less opportunity to participate to those who need it more, violates the idea of social justice, a concept that underpins today’s philosophy of widening participation in HE (Patton 2008, para. 6) and the foundations of public health itself (Germov 2019).

How can we improve the availability and accessibility of WIL across the MPH curriculum?

This section outlines ways the university can improve overall availability and accessibility of WIL for international students. To this end, a strengths-based approach is described that: 1) embeds a range of universal, flexible and culturally sensitive WIL opportunities within the curriculum and, 2) challenges unhelpful higher education and industry perspectives of the international student.

Flexible, universal and culturally sensitive approaches to non-placement and placement WIL

A myriad of on-campus WIL opportunities, such as mock interview scenarios, portfolio development and virtual simulation programs have been described in the literature (Ferns 2014). These non-placement forms of WIL may be more accessible to international students, but in some respects, may be seen as inferior to placement opportunities. To enhance the value of non-placement WIL, activities must be planned to develop students’ social and cultural capital (Gribble, Blackmore & Rahimi 2015).

Priority objectives of any WIL program must include the enhancement of student employability skills. English language proficiency is a key employability skill associated with labour market success. Approaches that embed rather than *add on* these and other employability skill activities are more accessible and empowering to the participating student (McWilliams & Allan 2014). Universal assessment tools are available to raise student awareness of any mismatch in their skills with university requirements, such as the Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA) which was developed with the primary intention of supporting international students’ English skills (Arkoudis et al. 2014).

Students’ social capital can be enriched through the facilitation of academic and social collaboration in class and online. Simple changes to learning and teaching activities can also support integration, for example, an assessment can be designed that requires student immersion in the local community. Signposting to university and community social and sports clubs is another easy way to help students gain a sense of belonging. It is also important that academics realise international students may not possess the social networks required to find a suitable WIL placement without their guidance (Blackmore et al. 2014).

Designers of inclusive WIL experiences also require a level of cultural sensitivity and awareness. This includes an understanding of the cultural perspectives, expectations and lived experiences of international students who may not subscribe to Western neoliberal ideology. For example, the Australian idea of being an independent self-starter and critical thinker may not be recognised. WIL activities that make these expectations explicit and support their development are important (Allen et al. 2013). It is also important to recognise the financial implications of placement WIL activities, which may be disproportionately high for international students (Grant-Smith, Gillett-Swan & Chapman 2017).

For international students to achieve optimal engagement in WIL placements, their supervision must be carefully planned. Although a discussion of best practice international public health student supervision is absent from the WIL literature, examples are available in the counselling research. Arkin (2012) for example has developed a model that embraces the different strengths of international counselling students while maintaining host country requirements and expectations. This approach facilitates students' awareness of their personal values and prejudices and potential conflicts with Australian expectations in academia and the workplace. Arkin (2012) also describes a supervision environment that can improve the cultural competency of students and academics alike.

Challenging unhelpful Higher Education and industry perspectives of the international student

The first part of this discussion, on how to improve WIL availability and accessibility, has focussed on activities that mitigate the *deficits* or *dissonance* in international student social, cultural and economic capital. This may seem reasonable given the influence these capitals have on student opportunity. Taken alone however, this could be regarded as a prejudicial, narrow approach.

Gribble et al. (2015), Jackson (2017) and Pham et al. (2018) have described how the widely held deficit perspective of international students influences the view of international students as weaker or less desirable WIL candidates. Allen et al. (2013) has argued such perceptions can lead to the *filtering out* of minority student applicants for competitive placement WIL opportunities.

The findings of a recent study of 212 business students at a Western Australian university challenge the credibility of the practice described in this paper, in which admission to practise WIL is determined by past grades. This study found students' scores were not correlated with supervisor' assessment of placement performance (Jackson 2020). A more inclusive approach to admission is required that considers the many qualities of international students, many of which are highly relevant to placement WIL and future employment. These include high levels of motivation, and a wider multicultural and multidisciplinary outlook than their more *siloes* domestic peers (Jackson 2017).

The deficit perception of international students also extends to industry, where an ethnocentric attitude reduces willingness to accept placement students and later employ them (Blackmore et al. 2014). This attitude is highlighted in a national survey of 527 employers which reported 66% did not employ international graduates, the main reasons given being: a preference for Australians (40%) the belief that international graduates are not suitable for the role (20%) (Hobsons Solutions 2016).

Expecting international students to *fit-in* with the Australian workplace model, implies this model has no need for enhancement or development. In a globalised world this is unrealistic and ill advised. It is also worth noting that "some academics, industry bodies and representatives from government are concerned that the emphasis placed on 'best fit' could be a proxy for racism in the Australian labour market" (Blackmore et al. 2014, p. 5).

Findings from a national survey of employers with a strong international graduate workforce contradict these ideas, reporting that this group bring diversity, new language skills to support international relations, new ways to problem solve, and increased cultural sensitivity to the workplace. International graduates were also reported to have a stronger work ethic than their domestic graduate colleagues (Hobson 2016). Arkoudis et al. (2014) suggest that the pursuit of a

more balanced and inclusive approach requires efforts that enhance employers' awareness of such strengths, through collaboration exercises that showcase them.

More research is required to add to the evidence base that can challenge the deficit view of international students and their capacity to partake in WIL placement. Wider ideas of capital are required to frame this evidence, such as Yosso's *Community Wealth Model* (2005), developed with students of colour in the USA and Andrew's adaptation of this model, the *Dimensions of Capital Framework* (2019) developed with mature-age women students in Australia. These more inclusive models capture previously hidden qualities including multilingual skills (linguistic capital), global experiences in work and social life (experiential capital) and resilience in overcoming prejudice and social systems of disadvantage (resistant capital). Evidence from such studies can guide a fuller understanding of the international student experience, which in turn can inform more inclusive and effective WIL practices in Australian HE.

Final reflections

Although this discussion talks to an audience of academics, it is impossible to enact broad and lasting change without the buy-in from national leaders in HE and industry (Hobsons Solutions 2016). Quality links between the university and potential employers must be nurtured and encouraged through federal policy and HE strategy (Universities Australia 2015). Where placement WIL is unavailable, flexible and culturally sensitive non-placement opportunities require development. In an era when international students increasingly expect WIL opportunities, such investment will not only support social justice, but enhance the global reputation of Australian HE and secure the supply of financial and cultural benefits international students offer to Australian society.

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